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AUTHOR Conklin, Karen A.
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the results of a 5-year statewide follow-up study of first-time, full-time community college students in Kansas, and documents the academic and career progress of these students from first entry into college to subsequent experiences after leaving the community college. The study, which began with 640 participants from 17 colleges, details students' success in reaching their personal, academic, and career objectives and describes the variables affecting progress in achieving those objectives. It is revealed that over 75 percent of the students had achieved their original educational objective and, if starting again, 80 percent would attend the same community college. Over 70 percent continued as full-time students throughout the 5 years the study was conducted. Of those survey respondents holding jobs, those who completed their bachelor's degrees received higher wages. A lack of funds, change in lifestyle, or a change in goals were most often cited as the reasons for not achieving educational objectives. Over one quarter of respondents transferred from one Kansas community college to another during the course of the study. The study also examined financial aid, degree/certificate completion, career choice, personal growth and development, comparisons of community colleges with high schools and with 4-year colleges, and educational plans. (Contains nine references.) (GLR)

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Community College Students:
Where Do They Go and What Do They Do?
A 5-year Statewide Follow-Up Study

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Karen A. Conklin
Market and Survey Research Analyst
Office of Institutional Research
Johnson County Community College
12345 College at Quivira
Overland Park, KS 66210-1299
(913) 469-8500, ext. 3443; FAX (913) 469-4409

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Jean Endo
Chair and Editor
Forum Publications
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Abstract

This paper describes results of a 5-year statewide follow-up study of first-time, full-time community college students and documents the academic and career progress of these students from first entry into college to subsequent experiences after leaving the community college. Results detail students' success in reaching their personal, academic and career objectives and describe the variables affecting progress in achieving those objectives. Over 75% had achieved their original educational objective and, if starting again, 80% would attend the same community college. Lack of funds, change in life-style, or a change in goals were most often cited as the reasons for not achieving educational objectives. One surprising finding was that 27% of respondents transferred from one Kansas community college to another during the course of the study. Additional studies are indicated to identify continuing educational pursuits of students who formerly may have been assumed to be community college dropouts.

Community College Students: Where Do They Go and What Do They Do? A 5-Year Statewide Follow-Up Study

The mandate to formulate and utilize reliable indices of institutional effectiveness is clear and unambiguous, both for community colleges and 4-year colleges and universities. Unlike 4-year institutions, however, community colleges cannot point to the number of annual graduates as a valid measure of institutional effectiveness. Rather, community colleges must, in part, rely on attainment of individual educational objectives, student satisfaction with various aspects of their community college experience, success in the workplace subsequent to completion of a course of study, and other such indices.

Thus, in July of 1985 the Kansas Council of Community College Presidents commissioned the Office of Institutional Research at Johnson County Community College (JCCC) to coordinate a 5-year longitudinal study of representative groups of students at community colleges throughout the state. The primary purpose of this study was to document the academic and career progress of these students from first entry into college to subsequent experiences after leaving the community college. Secondary objectives were to provide community colleges with an evaluation of students' success in reaching their personal, academic, and career objectives; to determine the variables that affect progress in achieving those objectives; to enhance understanding of the growth and development of study participants over time; to provide insights into

factors affecting community college attrition; and to determine when attrition may not, in fact, be attrition.

Although the National Center for Educational Statistics has conducted the "High School and Beyond" national longitudinal study for some time, to our knowledge this was the first statewide longitudinal study of first-time, full-time community college students ever conducted. As such, the results provide an important contribution to the existing body of knowledge detailing the personal and educational experiences of community college students over an extended period of time.

Review of the Literature

The principal purpose of community colleges is unquestionably to help students learn and reach their educational objectives (Palmer, 1990). Leading educational researchers have also expressed the view that a college education should involve changes not just in substantive learning and cognitive and intellectual competence, but in a variety of interpersonal and psychosocial areas as well (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). An understanding of the persistence/attrition phenomenon is necessary if an institution is to develop programs that facilitate attainment of the educational goals of each entering student (Brigman & Jacobs, 1979). Although the problems of attrition appear to be much more severe at community colleges than at 4-year colleges and universities, there have been few published studies of the factors that affect retention in these colleges (Baird, 1991). Furthermore, documentation of the increasingly typical "drop-in/drop-out" phenomenon so prevalent among college students today has been limited, at best (Conklin, 1991). No reports

describing similar comprehensive, long-term statewide follow-up studies of community college students were located in the ERIC database for 1980 and beyond.

Methodology

In fall of 1985 the 17 participating colleges each selected a group of representative first-time, full-time freshmen who agreed in writing to have their progress followed over a 5-year period. "First-time" was defined as those students with no known previous education at the postsecondary level. "Full-time" was defined as those students who were enrolled in 12 or more credit hours as of the 20th day of the fall 1985 semester.

Participating colleges followed up members of their study group every fall and spring for the first 3 years and in spring only for the final 2 years, using surveys designed by the JCCC Office of Institutional Research to insure collection of comparable data. Two mailings with cover letters were conducted for each survey. Additionally, attempts were made to reach all nonrespondents to the final survey by telephone during the summer of 1990, utilizing phone numbers collected on previous completed surveys and emergency numbers from the 640 participant agreements collected in 1985.

A predictable decline in the number of respondents was realized throughout the majority of the study, but a substantial increase in the number of respondents to the 1990 survey was accomplished through combined mail and telephone efforts, resulting in an unadjusted response rate of 65% and an adjusted rate of 83%. For purposes of this study, "adjusted" was defined as elimination of study participants who had no opportunity to respond due to death, disconnected telephones, or lack of viable addresses.

The JCCC Office of Institutional Research provided sample letters of transmittal and sufficient copies of each survey to all participating colleges, and suggested mailing dates deemed most advantageous to elicit a maximum response. Completed surveys (or copies) were forwarded to JCCC for data entry, storage, and analysis.

A 2-year interim report describing results of the first four surveys was made available in fall of 1987, and a 5-year report detailing comparisons of findings by geographic region and grouped by subject was published in April of 1991. Finally, a chronological report was published in July of 1991 which detailed results for JCCC study participants vs. respondents who initiated their college education at other Kansas community colleges.

Results

Study participants were representative of the majority of Kansas first-time, full-time community college freshmen. When the study was initiated in fall of 1985, over 77% of the study participants were less than 20 years of age, 10% were between 20 and 24, and 13% were 25 or older. Minorities comprised 8% of the study group, reflective of the Kansas population at that time, and females comprised 61% of the study group, the same as the population of Kansas community college students as a whole.

Employment

Approximately 56% of study participants were employed in fall of 1985, and by spring of 1990 over 85% of survey respondents held jobs. Average hourly wages of those employed full-time reflected one of the benefits of completing a college degree--higher earnings. Respondents with some

college but no degree reported an average hourly wage of $7.07, respondents with an associate's degree earned an average of $7.52, and those with a bachelor's degree earned an average of $9.19 an hour.

Educational Experiences

The community college was the first choice for 78% of respondents to the initial survey. Reasons most often cited were the convenient location, availability of scholarships and financial aid, and the low cost of attending. The opinion of authority figures had little apparent impact on ultimate college choice. Only 5% of respondents indicated the advice or encouragement of parents or relatives had a substantial impact on their decision, and less than 1% indicated high school counselors or teachers had influenced their college choice.

Financial aid. Although eight out of ten respondents received some form of financial aid during the 5 years the study was in progress, the median educational loan was surprisingly low considering the majority of respondents described their parents' economic status during their teen years as "middle class." The median total loan accumulated at the community college was just over $2,000, and the median total loan at other colleges or universities attended was approximately $4,000 for the entire 5 year period.

Enrollment pattern. A substantially greater percent of respondents than might be expected, over 70%, continued as full-time students throughout the 5 years the study was conducted. Less than 3% described themselves as dropouts, although 13% indicated they had stopped out for one or more semesters between fall 1985 and spring 1990.

Satisfaction. Satisfaction with the community college was measured in a variety of ways and elicited very positive results. Perhaps the strongest measure of satisfaction was derived from the fact that eight out of ten respondents indicated they would recommend the community college to friends and would encourage their own children to attend a community college.

Nearly 80% of respondents expressed satisfaction with their overall community college experiences and with their performance at the community college. If starting again, the majority indicated they would attend the same community college and pursue the same major, although one in four did change majors within the first two years of the study. Nine out of ten respondents also indicated their community college experiences had improved the quality of their lives.

The community college was credited by nine out of ten respondents with helping them to grow socially and academically, and with providing a good start toward a bachelor's program. One in two respondents felt students initiating their education at a community college did as well as or better than students who enrolled at a 4-year college or university immediately following high school.

Transfer

Three out of four respondents who initially planned to transfer to a 4-year college or university had accomplished that goal by 1990. However, the assumption that community college students transfer to one particular 4-year college or university to complete their education was not validated. Rather, nearly one in four had attended three or more colleges or universities, including their original community college, and 27% had transferred from their

original Kansas community college to a different Kansas community college. Furthermore, nearly 13% of 1990 respondents who planned to re-enroll within the next year planned to once more attend a Kansas community college. Thus, results of follow-up studies of transfer students which are predicated on the belief that students "progress" from the community college to a single 4-year college or university may underestimate achievement of bachelor's degrees.

Transfer problems. Although 51% of respondents reported few serious problems in adjusting to a 4-year college or university when transferring from the community college, many offered comments which suggested a need for enhanced preparation for transfer. These respondents described their initial experiences at the university as "transfer shock." Adjusting to the larger classes and impersonal atmosphere of a major university was described as "difficult" after the encouraging atmosphere and individual attention they had experienced at the community college. Also cited were problems in adjusting to university social life after the limited opportunities for social interaction at the community college.

Achievement of Educational Objectives

The vast majority of respondents "got what they came for." Nearly 77% had achieved their original educational objective during the 5 years the study was in progress and, of those, three out of four indicated the community college had helped them to achieve that objective.

Nearly 76% of respondents who originally planned to transfer to another college or university had done so by 1990, and 81% of those who enrolled at a Kansas community college in 1985 to develop or improve job skills had accomplished that goal. Nearly 42% of those who had achieved their

educational objective did so in 2 years or less; 12% required 3 years, 17% took 4 years, and 29% required 5 years to complete the task.

These are important findings, given the recent emphasis on achievement of students' educational objectives as major indices of institutional effectiveness for community colleges (Walleri, Seybert & Cosgrove, 1992).

Reasons for not achieving objectives. For the 23% who did not achieve their objective, lack of funds, change in life-style, or a change in goals were most often cited as the reasons for not doing so. Between 1985 and 1990 nearly 40% of respondents entered into a marriage, and one in four added at least one child to the family unit. Approximately 6% obtained a divorce, 30% were hospitalized one or more times, and one in four reported at least one period of acute financial difficulty. Additionally, a median of 2.2 moves and 2.2 job changes were reported. Approximately one in three respondents who had experienced one or more of these "life-style changes" quit school, either temporarily or permanently, as a result of those changes.

Due to the nature of the reasons for not achieving educational objectives, it would appear college-initiated interventions to encourage these students to continue their education would in all probability have been ineffective.

Degree/Certificate Completion

The completion rate for study participants was much higher than anticipated in view of recently published findings which indicated that by 1986 only 53% of the 1980 high school graduates nationwide who entered college immediately and attended full-time earned a degree (ACE, 1991). Nearly 75% of

respondents to the Kansas community college study had completed certificates and/or degrees by 1990, and an additional 6% described themselves as "not degree-seeking." Nearly 38% had earned bachelor's degrees, 34% had earned associate's degrees, and 3% had earned certificates.

Career Choice

Careers in business and education were more popular with the Kansas study group than with college freshmen in other parts of the country. In 1985 over 28% of the Kansas study participants planned a career in business and 14% planned to enter the field of education; by 1987 those figures had grown to 32% interested in a career in business and 19% in education. By comparison, only 22% of college freshmen nationwide were majoring in business in 1989, and 8% were majoring in education (CIRP, 1989).

Personal Growth and Development

A variety of cognitive and noncognitive behaviors were enhanced by study participants' educational experiences during the 5 years the study was conducted. Over 80% reported improvement in their overall level of maturity, general understanding of the world, sense of responsibility, and decision-making skills. Improvements in self-confidence, self-esteem, personal ambition, and the ability to reason were reported by three out of four respondents. Over 60% also indicated improvement in their organizational skills; the ability to make sound moral judgments; writing, study and test-taking skills; perserverence; and the ability to concentrate.

A substantial percent of respondents also credited the community college with helping them to improve their ability to think and express opinions (74%), broaden their knowledge of the arts and sciences (68%), expand their

tolerance for people and ideas (57%), and improve their ability to get along with others (56%). These findings are important in light of the paucity of data regarding noncognitive, affective outcomes of the college experiences of community college students.

High School/Community College Comparisons

Nine out of ten respondents found coursework more interesting in college than in high school, and the majority also felt the quality of community college instruction was better. Except for studying, respondents reported less time spent on school-related activities in college than in high school.

An interesting inverse relationship was evident between the percent who studied more in college than in high school (80%) and the percent who reported their college grades were lower than their high school grades (20%), providing documentation for the obvious conclusion that the time and effort expended in studying actually does result in higher grades.

Community/4 Year College Comparisons

Notable increases were evident in the percent of respondents involved in college career clubs (from 21% to 33%), fraternal organizations (from 4% to 13%), and religious organizations (from 2% to 9%) during the first 3 years the study was conducted, and a substantial decrease was realized in the percent participating in college athletics (from 59% to 32%).

Substantial differences in respondent satisfaction with various aspects of their community college experiences vs. their 4-year college or university experiences were also noted. At least 20% more respondents expressed satisfaction with the helpfulness of faculty and support staff, availability of financial aid, convenience of class scheduling, and the registration

process at the community college than at the 4-year college or university. Conversely, at least 20% more respondents expressed satisfaction with the social life, career preparation, and job placement services at the 4-year college or university than at the community college. See Table 1.

Insert Table 1

Educational Plans

Educational ambition increased over time. A comparison of 1990 degree intent and the degree intent declared by the same respondents in 1985 indicated a greater percent planned to earn a graduate degree in 1990 (39%) than had planned to pursue a graduate degree in 1985 (32%). Although the percent planning to pursue a doctorate or professional degree declined slightly (from 10% to 9%), those planning to earn a master's degree increased from 22% in 1985 to 30% in 1990.

One in two respondents to the 1990 survey planned to enroll again within the next year. Predictably, the future educational plans of respondents centered primarily around preparing for the job market (25%), improving present job skills (23%), or transferring to a different college or university (22%). Only one in ten indicated no plans for pursuing additional education.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Clearly the Kansas community colleges' programs were highly effective. Several important components of the community college mission were accomplished as these colleges strived to meet the various educational needs of their full-time, first-time freshmen. The majority of respondents expressed satisfaction with their community college experiences, their

personal growth and development, and their educational achievements. However, two recurring themes were apparent in the verbatim comments. Many respondents expressed the need for 1) preparing transfer students for the substantial differences in pressures and expectations at 4-year colleges and universities, and 2) assisting students of all ages to develop satisfying, comfortable social lives within the community college setting.

Leading educational researchers have expressed the view that a college education should involve changes not just in substantive learning and cognitive and intellectual competence, but in a variety of interpersonal and psychosocial areas as well (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). Ways must be found and resources provided to bring the social experiences of community college students closer to those of their 4-year college and university peers, and to adequately prepare them for successful transition to the 4-year college or university of their choice.

Finally, it should be noted that the students in this study were not "typical" community college students and thus these findings are not representative of all community college students. They are, nonetheless, interesting and do represent the academic and "life" progress of an important segment of the community college student population.

Additional study is indicated to substantiate the unusually high completion and low attrition rates of full-time, first time community college students, to enhance and standardize the methodology utilized in follow-up studies of transfer students to more accurately report ultimate educational outcomes, and to refine the definition of community college attrition to reflect achievement of educational objectives.

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Table 1

Satisfaction With Various Aspects of College

Spring 1989 (n=230)

Aspect of College	Satisfied w/Com. Col	Satisfied w/4-Year
Helpfulness of faculty	87.5%	64.9%
Convenience of class scheduling	86.7	63.9
Quality of instruction	84.3	74.5
Helpfulness of support staff	75.3	53.7
Availability of financial aid	73.7	49.6
Registration process	67.0	43.7
Variety of courses	74.3	91.1
Career preparation	59.5	82.8
Social life	53.8	65.9
Job placement services	25.1	45.3

Note. Data were collected on a 5-point scale ranging from "very satisfied" to "very dissatisfied. The above percentages reflect "very satisfied" and "somewhat satisfied" responses combined.